

Ironman Switzerland – Zurich – 25th July 2010

This would be my 4th occasion at tackling a 2.4 mile (3.8km) lake swim; 112 mile (180km) bike and 26.2 mile (42.2km) run, all on the same day. Those of you only interested in marathons might want to skip a few pages, but you will lose the context of the plot somewhat. The rest of you might want to sit down with a nice cuppa at hand before reading further as there's quite a bit for me to get through here; this is an Ironman after all!

Introduction

I did this event last year and was so impressed with the organisation, support and the surroundings that I simply had to return. I also had a score to settle since last year I missed out on a sub-12 hour finishing time last year by less than two minutes.

However, training over the last few months hadn't gone as well as I hoped. My cycling has had good moments, but equally had poor moments as well; especially when going uphill where I've never been strong. This was recently and cruelly demonstrated around the hillier parts of Exmoor for the Ironman UK 70.3 in June. My running was also becoming a bit lacklustre, particularly at the Potsdam marathon where I felt I should have got easily under four hours but didn't; Liechtenstein was something else so I won't even go there. So that basically left the swim as my only salvation for any room for improvement.

Friday – 23rd July

So it was with considerable apprehension when I arrived at Zurich on Friday afternoon, which wasn't made better by the fact it was raining heavily, very hot and with weather reports claiming a humidity of over 90%. To be honest you didn't need any weather reports to tell you that, it was like being in a tropical rain forest. Just assembling my bike on the hotel room was enough to bring me out in a sweat!

In the evening there was a welcome party. I missed this last year, but this time I managed to arrive in time to sort out race registration and attend the party as well, bearing in mind that the registration and the party were at different locations; thank goodness for efficient Swiss public transport! A four course meal was served including pasta followed by chicken and rice and cake for afters. We were also entertained by some old retainer on his accordion, cow bells and Alphorn; believe me you had to be there to appreciate his act!

Saturday – 24th July

With registration already sorted I opted for some sightseeing. However, as the weather was still poor, though the humidity had dropped a little, the sightseeing was somewhat limited; especially as not being my first time to Zurich I've seen most of the sights. So most of the afternoon was spent snoozing... I mean relaxing for the big day at the hotel. By late afternoon though I had get my bike to the transition area as bike racking was only permitted on Saturday and not on race day. Since bikes are charged for on trains in Zurich, and are not allowed on buses and trams, I decided to cycle the couple of miles from my hotel. En route it soon became clear that I wasn't alone in this approach as the roads to the transition soon became awash with cyclists, all heading for the same place.

There was quite a queue for people trying to get their bikes in to transition, so I decided to have a look around the competitors' village, checking out the latest triathlon sport gear before returning later on the hope that the queue would have died down, which it did. I was also pleasantly surprised that my racking space was nearly the same place as last year, right next to a tree, thus making the

task of remembering where it was a bit easier, bearing in mind that there was over 2000 bikes to choose from.

Sunday – 25th July

The day for me started at 4am, as I planned to catch the first train soon after 5am to the start. As I had such an early start my hotel was kind enough to give me a packed breakfast on Saturday evening as none of the hotel staff except the night porter, would be stupid enough to be around when I got up.

I arrived in good time and promptly set out the gear that I'll need for the day. Unlike some Ironman triathlons, all my kit had to be laid out by my bike. Personally I prefer this over the one bag per discipline approach. Then it was on with the wetsuit and off to the start.

The rain of the previous days was nowhere to be seen. Though it was cloudy, the clouds looked like they were breaking up and that a predominantly sunny day was on the cards.

The day before there were doubts as to whether wetsuits would be allowed as the temperature of the lake was quite warm. The official rules stated if the temperature is over 24.5 degrees C, then wetsuits are banned. However, the official temperature recorded at 6am, put the lake temperature at 22.8. So thankfully, we were ok and I'm sure many less able swimmers, including myself were mighty relieved at having a wetsuit, not so much to keep warm but the slight buoyancy advantage it offers! As I arrived in good time I took the opportunity to get in the water and 'warm up', before the organisers asked us to get out for the official start.

Swim

The mass start was at 7am with the elite started 5 minutes earlier. The start was actually about 100 metres in water from the shore. I was a bit slow swimming to the start, so consequently, by the time I'd arrived at the start line, the race has started! In fact a copycat scenario of last year!

The swim was a two lap affair, which involved getting on a small island at the end of the first lap to start the second. Each lap also involved swimming around two large yellow buoys. On the first lap at the second buoy I got tangled up with some of the breast stroke army and got a good kicking for my efforts. In fact I lost my swimming cap and nearly my goggles; another copycat scenario of last year.

Things didn't get much better, at the end of the first lap, the lake was quite shallow and consequently I cut my hands to shreds on the stony lake floor. Not sure what spectators thought when I emerged from the lake to start my second lap with blood coated hands! Anyway no time for medics now, I deal with it later I told myself.

I would have like to say the second lap was less eventful, but at the same second buoy, I got caught up in the mêlée again, however this time I gave back as good as I got. Not very sportsmanlike I know but breast stroking should really be banned!

At the end of the second lap, I made a point of keeping away from the shallow spots, so was able to get out of the water without any further injuries, in to transition.

T1

Apart from the bottom of the wetsuit getting caught up with the timing chip on my left ankle, this went smoothly and was uneventful by comparison. On with sunglasses, cycle helmet, socks and cycling shoes and then straight out. Even getting on the bike was straightforward with no mishaps of riders in front struggling to get going and blocking my route.

Bike

This was a two lap affair with the first 20 miles along the lake, making this section of the bike route flat and quick. My legs still felt fresh from the swim, so I took the advantage by pushing hard, overtaking pretty much everything in sight. It wasn't until the course left the lake and went steady uphill that I stopped gaining on other riders. The route continued in an undulating fashion and whilst I lost ground on the uphill sections, I more than made up time on the flat and downhill sections.

Eventually though I arrived at the first big uphill, known as the 'beast'; this was a long stretch complete with the odd hairpin bend. Surprisingly for me it didn't feel as intimidating as it looked, maybe because I was better mentally prepared for it than I was last year. In fact I even managed to overtake two cyclists up it! Ok, so there were plenty of other cyclists overtaking me, but I would catch most of them on the next flat. The next flat thought was short lived as then another long uphill stretch, this wasn't as steep, but still it certainly wasn't what you needed so soon after the 'beast'.

Then the route continued in an undulating fashion, but was predominantly downhill back to the lake where the course followed the lake back to the start, only to continue pass and a few miles down the road face a hill known as the 'heartbreaker'. This wasn't as long as the 'beast', but what it lack in length it made up in gradient. It comprised of two uphill sections with the second more steep than the first.

It is here that you understand the importance of support from the watching crowds. Like a scene from the Tour de France, people were shouting encouragement to all the riders. In fact the road difficult as it was was partly blocked by the crowds keen to egg us riders on. There were even words in chalk written on the road to add to the 'Le Tour' authenticity. Though I remembered all this from last year, it still seemed fresh and equally inspirational this year.

Then back downhill to pass the start again for lap two; however by now my backside was really complaining of the less than comfortable bike seat that it had to endure so far. So I had to occasionally stand up from the bike seat to ease the discomfort. Add to this that my legs were getting very tired from my now apparent over enthusiasm of the first lap and it was clear that the second lap wasn't going to be as quick. How much slower, I would never know as my speedometer stopped working soon after starting the second lap.

By the time I arrived back at the 'beast' it was very much a mind-over-matter situation and in reaching the top, was relieved for a bit of downhill. In fact this is how I tackle the second lap, taking respite on any downhill section.

However, by the time I arrived back at start to begin the 'heartbreaker', I knew this was going really test my resolve, but with the crowd supporting me, I didn't want to let them down. It wasn't pretty and the bike was swayed violently from side to side, but I made it!

Back downhill and towards the transition, which on the second lap seemed much longer to get to, but I got there.

T2

If T1 was uneventfully then this was more so. Rack the bike, off with the bike helmet and cycle shoes and on with the running shoes. If only all my transitions were like this!

Run

Firstly, welcome back marathon readers!

The run was a 4 lap affair around the south end of Zurich, with much of it alongside the lake; so in all very flat. The only gradients as such were a bridge and a couple of underpasses. The route was a mixture of roads and both gravel and asphalt paths. Unlike last year where too much consumption of cola on the bike section resulted in me having a panic attack, this time I was pretty much relaxed.

A quick glance at the stopwatch revealed that I was slightly ahead at this stage than last year. So whilst a quicker overall time for the event was possible it was by no means certain. However, I felt I didn't need to push to beat last year's time and as such opted to go for the steady and consistent pace, i.e. not too fast but avoid walking even at refreshment stations.

Halfway around each lap I had to collect a coloured wrist band and once I had four then I knew I could go for the finish. However, until then I had to pass the finish areas three agonising times, knowing I had to go around yet again.

For the first lap things went as planned; a steady consistent pace. By the second lap though I was beginning to tire and on the early gradients in the lap I struggled to get up them and so opted to walk the other gradients whilst running everywhere else. A theme I continued with on the remaining laps.

It was on the second lap that I'm overtaken by what I would learn later was the lead woman, finishing her final lap! As is the situation with multi-lap courses there were quite a few people overtaking me, but in turn I was overtaking other people as well. It was on the third lap that I'm momentarily caught by some girl from the Salisbury Triathlon Club. She was starting her first lap and a bit taken aback I think by how far behind me she was!

On the fourth and final lap I tried to up the pace as it had now dawned on me that a personal best overall time was on the cards, but only just! My best ever was 11:40:34 back in 2007 at Sherborne in Dorset. It was a strange feeling since before I started this race, I was thinking about my recent performances and 'realistically' setting myself a goal of getting under 12 and half hours at best, but now I was considering a PB!

But as the lap progressed it was difficult to keep the pace or anything near it, especially with the sun now clearly taking over the sky from the clouds of the morning, and as I approached the 40.5km marker the PB time passed. It was a long shot that was just too far for me, so the only consolation was to beat last year's time.

Whether I was imagining it or not, but I sensed that many in crowds seemed to know of my dilemma. Our race numbers had our first names on it and during the run many people; none who I knew, called out my name in encouragement, but it was only at 41km when someone says 'you can do it' that it really hits home.

My finishes are rarely pretty and elegant or for that matter quiet as I gasp for extra air. This was to be no exception. In fact a fellow competitor in front of me in the closing 200 metres or so, steps aside as I storm pass! As the finish gantry lay ahead there was another competitor approaching it. I couldn't let them get there first so I pushed harder once more to the line. I think we finished together but the official results have me finishing a mere tenth of a second ahead. That's Swiss timing for you!

Post Race

I took a while to get my composure and then after collecting my medal went to the competitor's refreshment area. After spending the day drinking sports drink and water and the odd energy gel, to start eating food was bit of a struggle and my thoughts were more on collecting my bike from transition, getting back to the hotel and crashing out!

Monday – 26th July

I surprised myself by being able to get up early. It was just as well as I needed to pack, including the bike, before heading off to the awards ceremony. This was a brunch that included scrambled eggs and sausages as well as muesli. Thankfully, my stomach was on eating terms again, so these went down better than the food of the day before.

At the awards ceremony, the organisers announced the overall winners as well as the age group winners. There was only one finisher in the over 70 age group and when he entered the main stage, he received a standing ovation. An appreciation of all concerned of his efforts and that you're never too old to be an Ironman!

The other highlight was the short film of the race, in particular the bit showing one of the elite athletes on leaving the swim, forgetting where his bike was racked, bearing in mind the elite have their own special uniquely coloured bike racks!

Stats

So on to the stats and for a bit of fun I've include last year's times for comparison. Note split times and last year's times are rounded to nearest second.

Section	2010	2009	Comment
<i>Swim Lap 1</i>	<i>0:38:21</i>	<i>0:39:35</i>	
<i>Swim Lap 2</i>	<i>0:43:25</i>	<i>0:45:11</i>	
Swim Total	1:21:47.9	1:24:46	Over 3 minutes quicker
T1	2:51.0	2:54	3 seconds quicker
<i>Bike Lap 1</i>	<i>2:47:48</i>	<i>2:48:09</i>	
<i>Bike Lap 2</i>	<i>3:04:26</i>	<i>3:04:34</i>	
Bike Total	5:52:15.3	5:52:44	I thought I was slower, but ½ minute quicker and a PB!
T2	2:20.1	3:41	Over a 1 minute quicker and a PB
<i>Run Lap 1</i>	<i>0:59:13</i>	<i>1:03:31</i>	
<i>Run Lap 2</i>	<i>1:07:07</i>	<i>1:09:13</i>	
<i>Run Lap 3</i>	<i>1:11:24</i>	<i>1:11:17</i>	
<i>Run Lap 4</i>	<i>1:15:24</i>	<i>1:13:18</i>	
Run Total	4:33:09.7	4:37:21	Over 4 minutes quicker
Overall	11:52:23.0	12:01:26	Nearly 9 minutes quicker

My overall time netted me 1238th of 2161 finishers; a further 168 athletes failed to finish. I was also 1141st male of the 1873 men finishers, 249th of 420 finishers in my age group (M40-44) and 156th Brit home out of 424. In fact it was a fellow Brit that I passed on the finishing line!

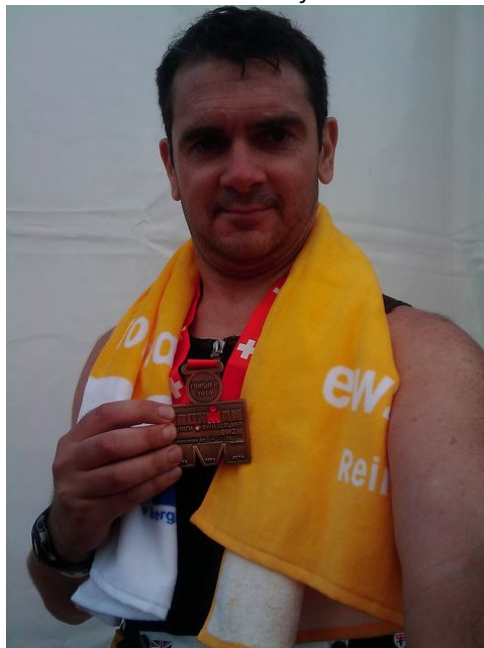
Photos



Overcast Zurich



Overcast Zurich seen from above



Not only a big medal, but you get a towel as well!